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DE STILO ET OPERE; OR, LOOKING FOR THE RULE[1]

I am grateful to the organizers of this conference for believing it worthwhile to talk, among ourselves and before a wider public, about our calling as teachers. In many academic environments I have known, this is not the sort of topic that colleagues routinely bring up. Especially in research universities, discussion about the hows and whys of teaching is usually outsourced to teaching support centers, and sometimes our graduate students are thrown into classrooms with no preparation or supervision at all. One reason for this development might have to do with the emergence of a new secular deity in contemporary culture, Efficiency. Grim, remorseless Efficiency contorts humane learning to make it look like science (or a certain misconception of science). It reduces our labor to number, with its outcomes, quality assessment measurements, and other Orwellian reassurances. How can the gifts of a Dante or Shakespeare or Mozart be recognized by such an accounting?

What gets lost in the pursuit of science is scholarship, which is not quite the same thing as research. The noun comes down to us by way of the Greek *scholé*, or leisure. What might an academic culture look like when it strolls the leisurely course of scholarship instead of being herded along the narrow one of research? A community of scholars creates a wide space where one is encouraged to read, think, converse, teach, read some more, teach some more, and, in the course of all this, write something. That less frenetic, more generous attitude toward what we do might dismay Efficiency, but I think it is a viable way of achieving a vibrant, productive academic life. This is a contemplative life, but hardly an unambitious or hermetic one, because it at once is sustained by and generates community.

And community, too, seems to get diminished in this changing academic culture. Or maybe that *locus amoenus academicus* was never actualized; it was only imagined, and I am being nostalgic about a non-existing past and therefore uncharitable toward an actual present. For it would indeed be ungracious and anti-intellectual to deny that an increasing orientation toward research in the humanities has yielded fine things. Contrariwise, many present-day exhortations for more interdisciplinarity proceed from the questionable belief that disciplines are rigid things incapable of change or self-reflection.

Still, underappreciated costs have accrued with this reorientation, and one place we can tally them is in our curriculum. The curriculum has increasingly

[1] I wish to thank Nina Penner for her comments on a draft of this essay.

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come to reflect specialized interest over shared value. Here, too, some reticence is in order even in making this distinction. One does not want to bridle the ambitions and talents of the individual, whose discoveries and passions, however idiosyncratic they first might seem, could come to enrich us all. To measure scholarly achievement solely by its relevance or utility is to regard human beings in instrumental terms. Even so, a research-intensive approach can have a constricting effect on both the individual and wider community. It can close off opportunities for contact with the unfamiliar, opportunities that are needed to spur invention and resist the slide into stasis. It can lead to a loss of interest in truth as something shareable, as something that matters. A dean once called me a dinosaur (he meant this as a compliment) for wanting to teach courses outside of my specialization, and to undergraduate non-majors, to boot: a course like "Mahler and Vienna", where we read Freud and Nietzsche and Darwin and Wittgenstein along with listening to some of the symphonies. To me that seems not inefficient but liberating.

Liberation. That is a value I keep returning to as I think about higher education today, and it is a reason why I am, along with being grateful to be here, also curious about being here. I wonder what sympathetic stirrings or animated resistance or just understanding or confusion such an ideal will elicit from the different academic cultures represented here. Its most proximate source for me are liberal arts colleges in the United States. These flowers of democracy sprouted up in ante-bellum America, and their zealous, missionary founders – mostly seminarians from out East – brought with them to the heart of the young nation "learning and labor", as the motto from my alma mater, Oberlin, has it. They introduced the liberal arts to attack privilege, to give students a sense of agency in a future that was waiting to be discovered and created, and to celebrate what culture had already achieved. Culture, including music, of course, is an expression of the human mind, which, as far as we know, is the most complex thing in the universe.[2]

That is, or was, a high aspiration for education, and I think that some of that ambition has been dissipating, including in how we as music history teachers sometimes relate general style to individual work. Stanley Cavell once traced much of New Criticism's popularity to its teachability. He did not mean to praise New Criticism for that success but instead to point out its tendency to atomize art, to reduce its quality as human utterance to mechanism.[3] That habit is recognizable in the way music history courses today sometimes handle the

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[2] The ideas in this paragraph gloss M. Robinson's remarkable essay "A Great Amnesia", *Harper's Magazine*, May 2008, pp. 17-21.

[3] S. CAVELL, *The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of "King Lear"*, in ID., *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 41.

concept of style. We distill the artistic products of a given era down to elements: the pan-consonance of the Renaissance; the motoric rhythms of the High Baroque; the comic character of the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

That approach has undeniable pedagogical virtues. For example, it gives students a powerful way of dealing with unfamiliar works. It also has an overlooked scholarly utility. The concept of style facilitates a *history* of music that is also a history of *music*, to paraphrase Carl Dahlhaus.[4] Problems surface mainly when work is subordinated to style. Originally conceived as a tool for understanding the work, style becomes the point of the inquiry, where work now serves style. That reorientation affects how we encourage our students to listen to music. They are to listen for style elements, or for form as a mold into which content is poured. Convention then becomes a proscription to overcome instead of something that makes communication possible. What we do as ordinary listeners – attend to *meanings* (instead of to mechanisms) – gets overlooked.

Or, in some cases, banned. That is, it might not always be convenience that sanctions this approach toward style; it might be, rather, conviction. I'm thinking of the kind of idea that Adorno proposes in this elliptical expression: "we do not understand music, music understands us".[5] The individual composer, he seems to say, is at the mercy of the general style. He can only obey the material of music. He cannot stamp it with his mind, his way of thinking, his way of perceiving. Adorno's idea has had some staying power. Susan McClary, for example, follows it when she names the cadence, without regard to use or quality, "the most banal, most conventionalized cliché available within any given musical style".[6]

There are numerous reasons to hesitate before arguments of this kind. Conceptually, it diminishes the nature of human achievement and, therefore, is illiberal. Meaning, as Wittgenstein reminds us, is not in the sign but in its *use*, which, for an art appreciation, is to say that the individual achievement is not wholly reducible to type. To acknowledge the particular in art and human endeavor more widely is to enlarge our appreciation of Being, not constrict it. Practically, for all of the clarity and insight that this mode of criticism holds out, it winds up seeing less than the enchanted one it claims to have superseded.[7] The consequence is a flattened landscape. When all is banality (in

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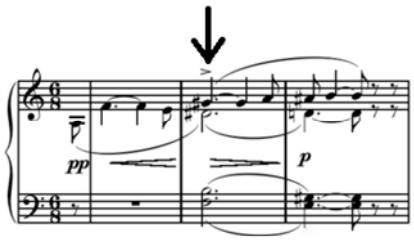
[4] C. DAHLHAUS, *The Significance of Art: Historical or Aesthetic?* in ID., *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 19-20.

[5] TH. W. ADORNO, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. XI.

[6] S. MCCLARY, *Feminine Endings*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 127.

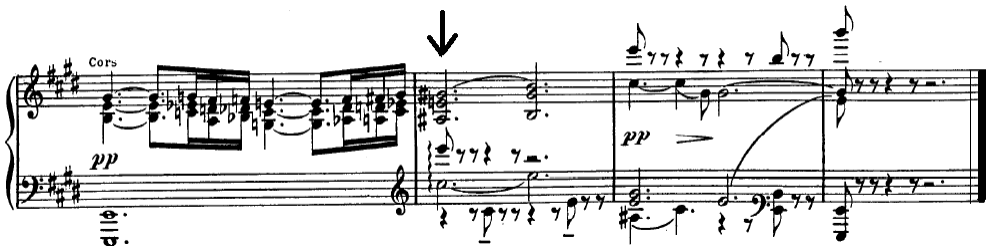
[7] A. D. Nuttall is very good on this point in developing the typology of "Transparent" and "Opaque" criticism. See the subsection "The Two Languages of

which case, banality ceases to have meaning), certain questions get closed off, like why *this* cadence, of *this* quality, by *this* person, here, and not elsewhere? You won't even notice, and then be able to reflect on, the difference between, say, Wagner's *Tristan* chord (Mus. Ex. 1)



Mus. Ex. 1 – RICHARD WAGNER, *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude (piano red.), mm. 1-3.

and Debussy's co-option of it (Mus. Ex. 2)



Mus. Ex. 2 – CLAUDE DEBUSSY, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (piano red.), ending.

Debussy, in putting Wagner's sonority into a different tonal world, is doing what good artists do: resist art's inevitable drift into cliché by reconceiving and revitalizing their musical language. If questions about the who and why of art are valid (and, practically speaking, people ask such questions all the time), that is because the cadence is a product of consciousness, and to call it cliché would be like calling the sentence cliché. For a fuller sense of what is there, you have to turn from device to mind, to the person who operates with the device.

Again, the approach that I am questioning is not wholly fruitless, but it cannot explain to ourselves the works that most capture our interest, the works that the concept of style was meant to serve in the first place. Nor can it do full justice to the feeling for the particular in our experience of art – that, when we listen to a piece of music, we are, among other things, listening to that individual work, listening to its choices, its character, and not to it as a potpourri of

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Criticism" in his *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, new ed., New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 80-94.

discrete elements. The popular pedagogical use of style makes it easy to explain how one work is like many others, but it labors to explicate difference.

At least since Kant, we have thought of the most compelling works of art as having two features: exemplarity and originality – genius as "the talent … that gives the rule to art".[8] That something can be exemplary – that is, subscribe to and advance a rule – *and* be original all at once might seem to strain logic (although not the testimony of experience). There is coherence and power in Kant's formulation, however, when you understand where he wants us to look for the rule. The rule itself is original and bound to the individual work. That is one implication of Kant's distinction between artists, who can be geniuses, and scientists, who cannot (§47). Apples fell from trees before Newton developed a theory of gravity, and they continue to do so. But with a work of art, the rule is created within the composition itself. Try taking a rule from one work of art and applying it to another, and the best you get is a copy, mere imitation. With a scientific law, the whole point is its replicability.

So, one crucial question for teaching work and style is, what does it look like to study a musical work by looking for its rule? This, by the way, is one of the biggest challenges I face in teaching music courses, to majors as well non-majors. It is difficult for them to say something about an individual work as such, to think about a work of art not just as a collection of elements, or as an exemplification of a form or style, but as a singular expression of thought.

For an example of what it might look like to seek out the rule within a specific work, I've chosen a form as conventional, as banal, if you will, as there is – an eighteenth-century rondo. This particular one comes from the last movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 88, from 1787. With a sonata from the Classical era, it is easier to make the case that we are not talking about a preexisting model. As Charles Rosen says, the term 'sonata' describes more "a way of writing" built on a sensitivity to the tension between tonic and dominant than "a pattern", a mold into which composers pour their melodies.[9] But when it comes to the rondo, expectations are more settled. The requirement is for tuneful, easily recognizable refrains in the tonic, stated more or less in complete form, and with contrasting episodes. That is its rule, and it operates outside of a particular piece.

What kind of rule could we find *inside* the piece? Let's start by looking at the nature of the material Haydn has chosen for this refrain. It has two main components. The first part of the theme is cast as a rustic tune, as if Haydn were

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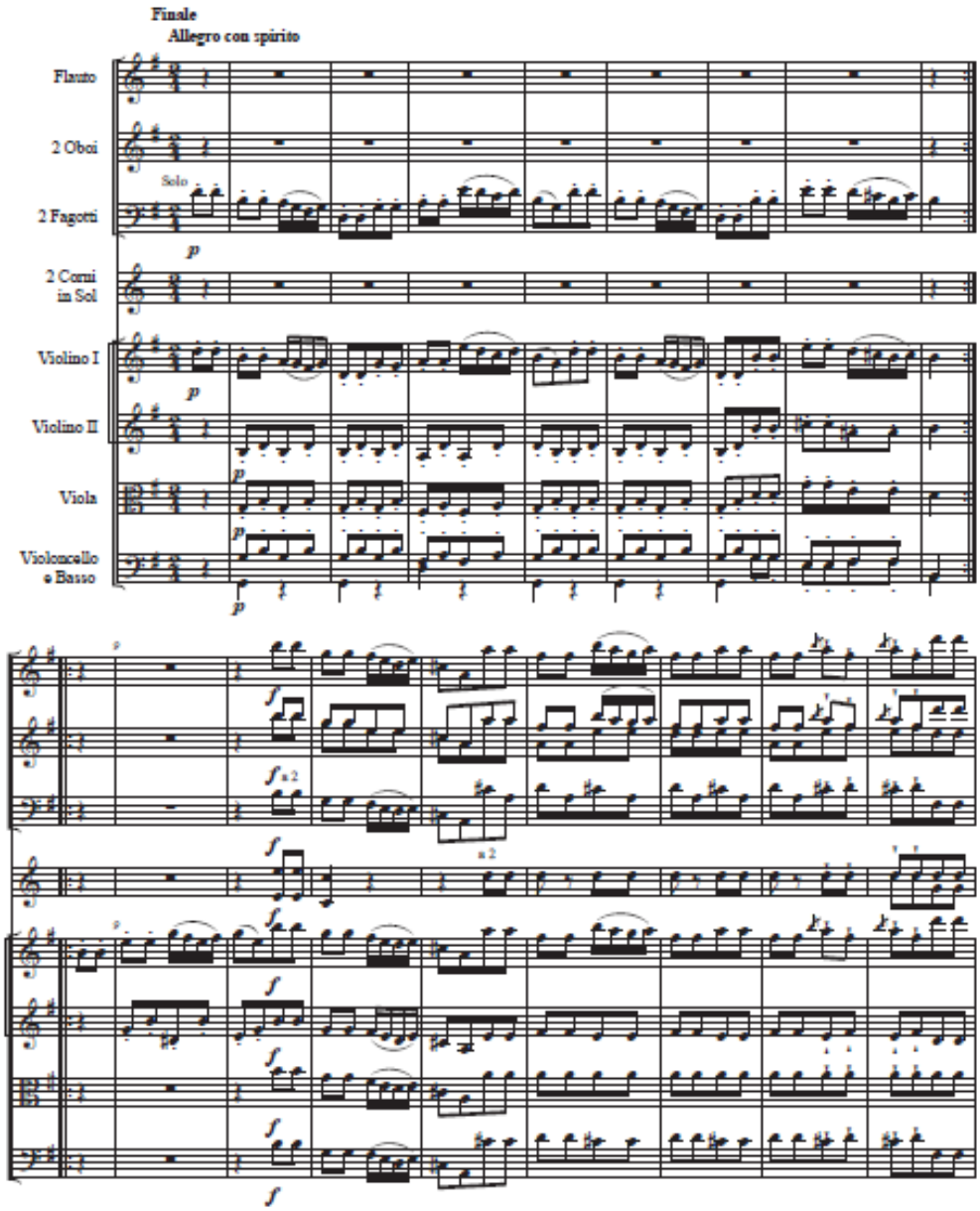
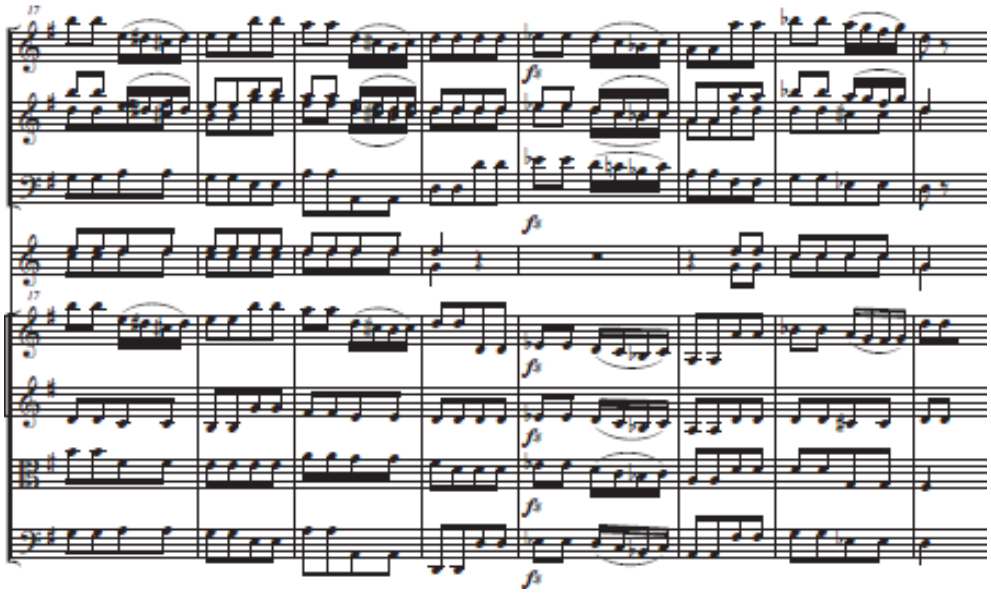
[8] I. KANT, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000 (*The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*), p. 186 (§46, 5:307).

[9] CH. ROSEN, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, expanded ed., New York, W. W. Norton, 1997, p. 30.

imitating a village wind-band (Mus. Ex. 3, mm. 1-8). But the second part, although of course having some considerable motivic similarities (this is Haydn, after all), has a markedly different character (Mus. Ex. 3, mm. 9-24). It is more symphonic, less tuneful; more developmental, less square and self-contained. The rule of the rondo asks for a recognizable, tuneful refrain. It does not demand this particular refrain, with its internal drama between a popular and grand style.

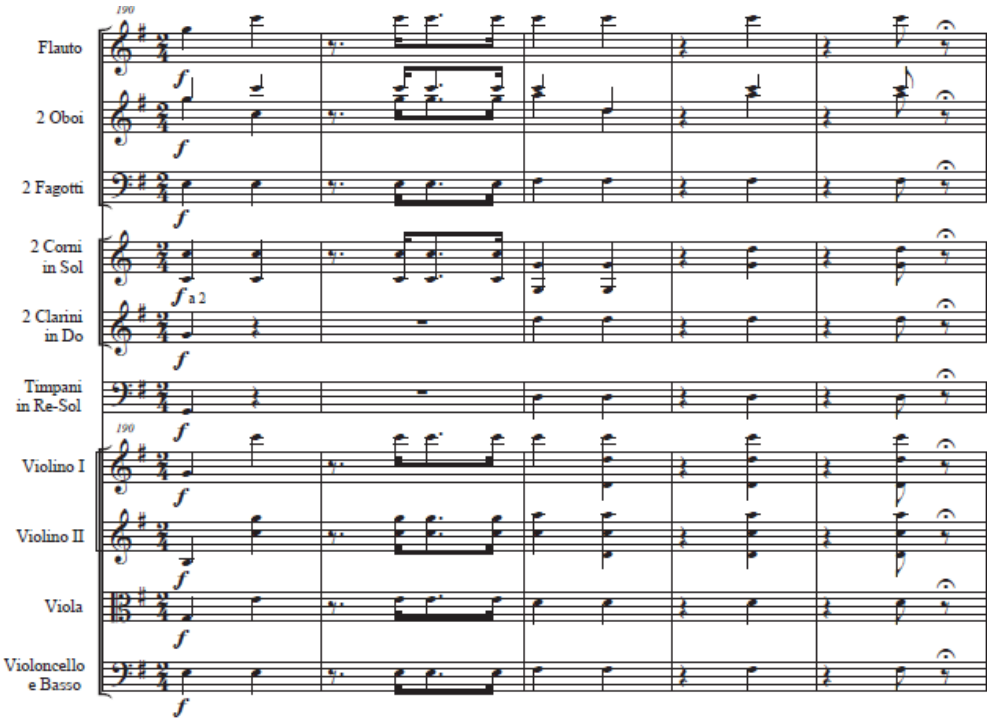


Mus. Ex. 3 (*beginning*) – JOSEF HAYDN, Symphony no. 88 in G major Hob I: 88, Fourth movement, mm. 1-24.



Mus. Ex. 3 (*conclusion*) – JOSEF HAYDN, Symphony no. 88 in G major Hob I: 88, Fourth Movement, mm. 1-24.

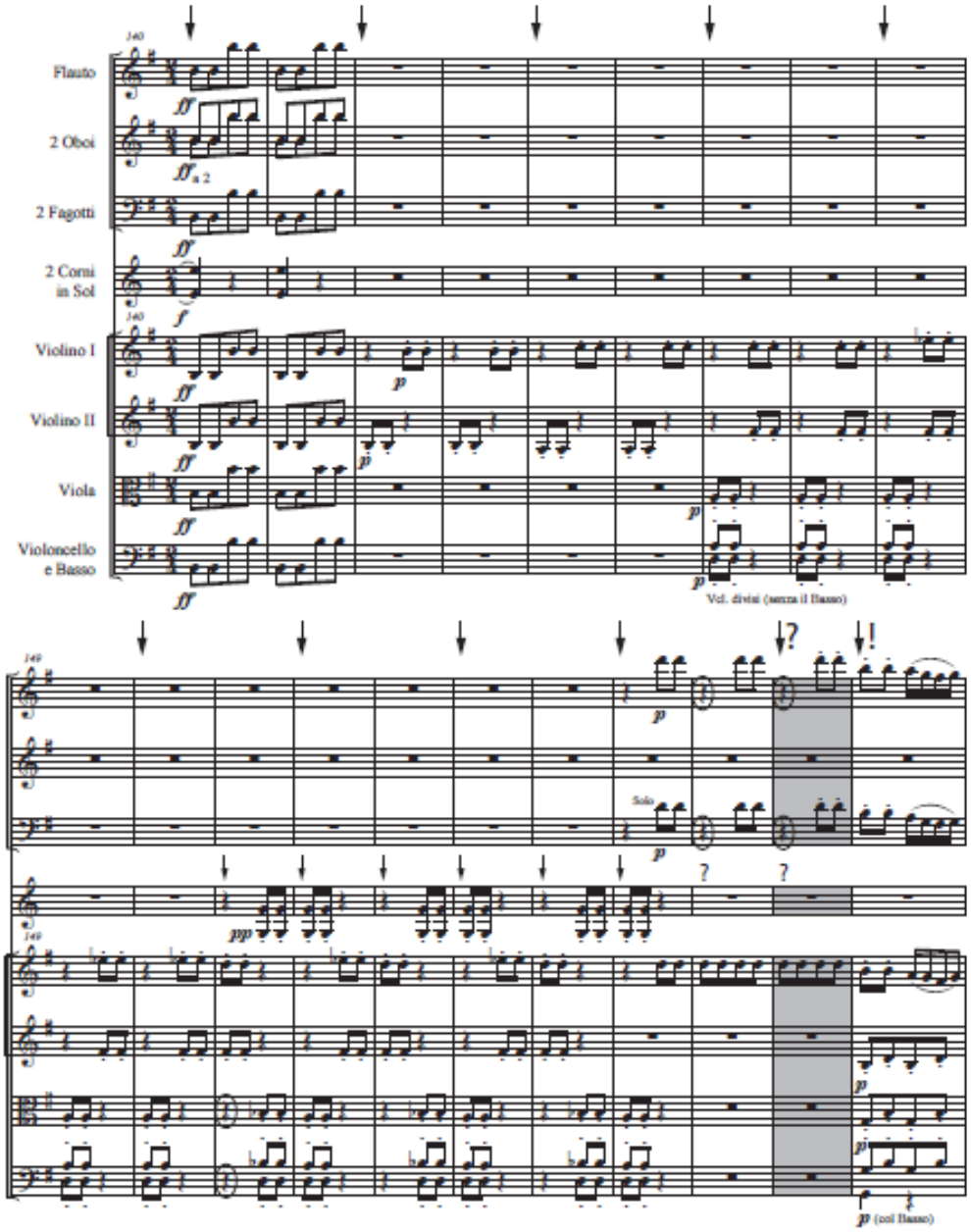
The refrain's stylistic conflict threads its way through to the end of the movement, where, just before the coda, the wind band stumbles and is taken over by the symphonic ensemble (Mus. Ex. 4, mm. 186ff).



Mus. Ex. 4 – JOSEF HAYDN, Symphony no. 88 in G major Hob I: 88, Fourth Movement, mm. 186-190.

But, even prior to that, Haydn gets some new use out of this old rondo form. His inventiveness can be appreciated even if one listens for forms and mechanisms (so long as they are not separated from experience – it is not as if meaning or expression are ingredients that are *added* to the form). We all know – Haydn knew, at least the learned among his audience knew – that he had to come back to the refrain. A challenge, then, is to make its reappearance seem natural without feeling predictable. Haydn brings about this pleasure obliquely, with a series of misdirections. The development episode climaxes in a foreign key and with the wrong instrumental group – the strings instead of the village wind band. So, already, the response Hadyn's form elicits is less, "oh, I see the refrain coming", and more, "how is he going to find his way out of this one?". Haydn proceeds by gradually cleaning up various messes, as it were: the wrong melody (descending half-steps instead of thirds), the wrong key (e-minor, at first), the wrong mode, the wrong style, the wrong instruments, the wrong register.

When the flute and bassoon appear, and in the proper register, the return of the refrain is immanent. But the genial composer gives his listener a gift, in measures 156 to 159 (Mus. Ex. 5).



Mus. Ex. 5 – JOSEF HAYDN, Symphony no. 88 in G major Hob I: 88, Fourth movement, mm. 140-159.

This moment's surface amiability is the product of a high order of craft, above all in its manipulation of phrase and pulse. (A passage like this bears out the truth of this accolade from Charles Rosen: "The pretension of Haydn's symphonies to a simplicity that appears to come from Nature itself is no mask but the true claim of a style whose command over the whole range of technique

is so great that it can ingenuously afford to disdain the outward appearance of high art").[10] Two patterns predominate. The more expansive one (indicated by the larger arrows in the example) involves establishing phrases grouped into two-bar units. (With measures 140 to 143, the grouping is determined by dynamics; with measure 144, by harmony; and with measure 151, by harmony and melody.) With measure 151, Haydn slightly alters this swing of the pendulum. Up to that point, the alternation between the upper and lower strings had been comprised of isolated two-note figures. With the violins' upbeat to measure 151, however, that pattern changes function and becomes anacrusic (as indicated by the smaller arrows in the middle of the system).

Having put that all together, Haydn then takes that all apart. With measure 157, the anacruses become vagrant, with no resolution on the following downbeat. Most consequentially, the larger two-bar pattern has a *third* bar inserted (measure 158). To be sure, there is a logic and economy in Haydn's eccentricity. The slowing down of the harmonic rhythm allows for a pause before the return of the main melody; the repeating eighth notes in the first violins (from measure 156) allow for a smooth rhythmic transition into the eighth-note pulse driving the refrain. Still, against the larger rhythmic pattern that Haydn has set up, the effect created by the extra measure and the suddenly vagabond anacruses is of tripping into the refrain.[11]

At the beginning of the movement, the objectifying, formalist listener might have dreaded the return of the refrain as the satisfaction of form in all of its predictability and banality. Now, however, it comes as a surprise to be welcoming its reappearance, to discover that Haydn's *Virtù* has won a round in its perpetual contest with musical *Fortuna*.

If all you want out of Haydn's symphonic finale is another example of rondo form, then you will miss what is distinctive about this one. That is because nothing proposed here requires that Haydn be thought of as breaking global rules governing rondos. The wit of the movement comes from the internal, non-transferable rule that he has set up. This rule operates in tandem with the material that he chose and used, not that chose and used him. Of course that material is *public* in nature (how could it not be?). It comes from the acquired learning and practices of culture. But then Haydn gives it back, renewed and enlivened.

And that brings me back to some of the democratic, liberal rumblings I made at the beginning. I do not want to assert *total* autonomy for artists here, the *total* liberation of the individual self. That would be incoherent and is at any

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[10] ROSEN, *The Classical Style* cit., p. 163.

[11] I am grateful to Lorenzo Bianconi for showing me sides of Haydn's ingenuity here that I would not otherwise have. (The musical examples were prepared by Fabio Regazzi, Bologna.)

rate impossible. But the kind of experience I think Haydn is offering us – when we listen with sympathy and understanding (which verge on the same thing) – is simply not comprehensible in general sociological terms. When we confront Haydn, or any good artist, we are not just dealing with codes and devices and gestures. That approach draws us downward, to a light-starved, pale sameness. Instead, we are looking at the achievement of a human mind, whose individual works of art expand our sense of what is possible.

The kind of pedagogy I advocate here promotes an appreciation of mystery and particularity. It is true that such an approach will necessarily be less systematic, but there need be no loss of rigor. Indeed, the intellect awakens when confronted with mystery and beauty. That is because there is no cause that one can give about how device and sign turn into thought and meaning. And without that recognition of mystery, we weaken the sense of human possibility and thereby rob from ourselves what limited, precious agency we do have in the world.